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SUBJECT: SERBIA: RASIM LJAJIC UNVEILS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF
SERBIA

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Summary

11. (SBU) The new Social Democratic Party of Serbia (SDPS),
led by popular Minister of Labor and Social Policy Rasim Ljajic,
held its founding party congress in Belgrade in mid-December.
Marking Ljajic's ascension from leadership of the regional Sandzak
Democratic Party (SDP) to a nation-wide political movement
(reftel), the SDPS congress attracted President Tadic, coalition
partners, and members of Serbia's nationalist opposition. With its
principles of promoting efficient state institutions, economic
development, normal political dialogue, constitutional patriotism,
and caring for the disadvantaged, the SDPS is positioning itself to
capitalize on Ljajic's personal popularity and to advocate modern
European values on Serbia's left. End Summary.

Ljajic Officially Forms SDPS

12. (SBU) Political, labor, and intellectual figures
descended upon Belgrade's Sava Center on December 12 to mark the
formal creation of the SDPS led by Minister of Labor and Social
Policy Rasim Ljajic. The SDPS founding congress attracted such
luminaries as President Boris Tadic, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic,
Education Minister Zarko Obradovic (Socialist Party of Serbia-SPS),
Diaspora Minister Srdjan Sreckovic (Serbian Renewal Movement-SPO),
National Investment Plan Minister Verica Kalanovic, League of
Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) head Nenad Canak, SPO president
Vuk Draskovic, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) deputy president
Aleksandar Vucic, Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) economic council
head Nenad Popovic, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) MP Kenan
Hajdarevic, Democratic Christian Party of Serbia (DHSS) head Vladan
Batic, Together for Sumadija (ZZS) deputy president Sasa Milenic,
United Serbia (JS) MP Jasmina Milosevic, and representatives from
sister parties in Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. An
array of labor syndicates, left-leaning intellectuals, and
non-governmental organizations also attended the proceedings as did
numerous ordinary citizens, many of whom the SDPS brought in by bus
in order to pack the 3,600 seats of the Sava Center's main hall.
Nearly all high officials of the SDP (which Ljajic formally led
until recently) also attended, but without any public role.

13. (U) The party congress began with the national anthem followed by an introductory film highlighting the values of the SDPS. Featuring short interviews with activists, youth, pensioners, and workers on the street, the film emphasized the space existing in Serbian politics for a viable social democratic party and lauded Ljajic's personal leadership. Reiterating the party's slogan "one Serbia," the film also emphasized the key themes of the SDPS platform including building up the state, constitutional patriotism, protecting the development of democracy, decentralization and regionalization, fight against crime and corruption, and social democratic economy.

Coalition Partners Sing Rasim's Praise...

14. (SBU) President Tadic headline a series of speeches from government coalition partners praising Ljajic's vision and character. Tadic said that social democratic parties must take into consideration the most vulnerable segments of the population, as well as preserve the stability and financial sustainability of the state and promote economic growth. He emphasized the need for business owners to assume social responsibility. Describing the SDPS as "the closest sister party" of the Democratic Party, Tadic said both parties agreed that "the best social policy is the policy

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of development and growth" and social policy based on budget expenditures was not sustainable. (Comment: Strikingly absent from Tadic's comments was any mention of EU integration.)

15. (SBU) Other speakers were similarly laudatory of Ljajic. Canak (LSV) followed Tadic in offering congratulations to Ljajic and welcoming the existence of a nationwide social democratic party. Draskovic (SPO) noted that despite being on the opposite end of the political spectrum, he supported Ljajic since "we are both parts of the same body of Serbia." Draskovic provided the most catchy sound bite of the congress, commenting that everyone from those living in difficult conditions to Serbia's Prime Minister (responsible for finding Hague indictee Ratko Mladic) all turned to Ljajic to say "Rasime, spasi me" ("Rasim, save me"). Obradovic represented SPS head Ivica Dacic (who was traveling) in welcoming another voice on the left for Serbia's disadvantaged. Representatives of sister social democratic parties from Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the United Independent Serbian Party from Croatia also gave short speeches.

...As Does the Opposition

16. (SBU) The SDPS congress also featured remarks by two key Serbian opposition party members. In strikingly undiplomatic comments, Vucic (SNS) said he wished Tadic had not left the congress early because Vucic wanted to tell Tadic that there would always be a place for Ljajic in the SNS-led future government after the SNS beat the DS in the next elections. Popovic (DSS) offered more boilerplate language complimenting Ljajic's focus on development and economic issues while stopping short of suggesting DSS cooperation with the SDPS.

Ljajic's Vision

17. (SBU) Following over an hour's worth of congratulatory speeches, Ljajic took the stage flanked by roughly fifty young people waved long-stemmed roses above their heads. Ljajic stated that the diversity of parties represented at the congress reflected the SDPS's goal of encouraging a peaceful and normal dialogue between all parties of the government. Serbia needed to develop stable institutions, efficient administrations, a government with no more than 15 ministers, and a National Assembly of roughly 150 MPs, Ljajic said. Describing Serbia's membership in the EU as one of his party's primary goals, Ljajic noted that Serbia needed to sort out its affairs at home in order to be a good neighbor and a reliable partner, adding, in particular that Serbia needed a dialogue and consensus over basic state issues such as decentralization and the status of Kosovo. Ljajic declared that the SDPS would not take a single cent from any tycoon because the SDPS would not "be a corporation from which anybody will profit." Ljajic closed by reiterating his commitment to Serbia's youth through advancing the values of equality and protection of the disadvantaged.

Comment

18. (SBU) The high-level representation from the entire Serbian political spectrum at the SDPS congress was testament to Ljajic's popularity and political astuteness. By leaving behind

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(albeit nominally) the regional minority SDP to lead the national-level SDPS, Ljajic is banking on his popularity and social democratic message to appeal to a wider audience, including Serbia's disadvantaged. However, political analysts have pointed to the poor track record of social democratic movements in Serbia and expressed skepticism to us that the SDPS could meet the five percent threshold in national elections without going into an electoral coalition with the DS; Ljajic has said he would welcome that. Much of the impetus to form the party has come from Ljajic's desire to enhance his personal image and political influence. Ljajic is an energetic and dedicated minister who reaches out to and has the pulse of the ordinary citizen. The only coalition politician to regularly speak about the need to support the ICTY, Ljajic is well placed to be an influential voice in advancing the European values that Serbia must embrace to emerge from its troubled past. End Comment.

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